

LEGISLATIVE ISSUES

Discussion

In anticipation of the 2006 Kentucky General Session, the staffs of the Kentucky Higher Education Assistance Authority, the Council on Postsecondary Education, and the Kentucky Department of Education are developing a proposal for revisions to the Kentucky Education Excellence Scholarship (KEES) program.

The KEES program was established in 1998-99. Modeled on Georgia's HOPE scholarships, the KEES program was designed both as a merit scholarship incentive to retain Kentucky's most capable students in Kentucky and as an incentive fund to increase college-enrollment. KEES awards are based on a cumulative high school GPA of 2.5 or higher, with extra weighting given for Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate courses. Additional credit is given for ACT scores of 15 or higher. Students can earn a maximum of \$2,500 per year for a total of \$10,000.

Public awareness of the KEES program has expanded and the program has broad political support. From a policy perspective, the KEES program has several attractive elements:

1. With no application required, students least familiar with the financial aid process are able to benefit from the program. Kentucky students enrolled in Kentucky postsecondary institutions simply see their awards credited to their college bills.
2. A 2.5 GPA threshold provides a financial incentive for college-going for students who might not otherwise attend.
3. Adding an additional award for ACT scores calibrates the award to a national standard and provides an incentive for students to attempt the ACT.

Still, nearly 40 percent of the students who receive KEES scholarships do not retain them for their sophomore year in college. For some, this is because they are unable to maintain the required college GPA of 2.5. To ensure that more KEES recipients are better prepared for college-level work, many (including the Prichard Committee's Task Force on High Achieving High Schools) have recommended policy changes to increase the likelihood that KEES scholarships lead to college success.

Administration of the KEES program shifted from the Council on Postsecondary Education to the Kentucky Higher Education Assistance Authority in July 2005. The staffs from both agencies and the Kentucky Department of Education are working closely to modify key KEES elements to better achieve the desired policy results of maintaining broad access to postsecondary

education and increasing likelihood of postsecondary completion for Kentucky students at Kentucky institutions. Modifications to the KEES regulations being considered include:

- Restricting the curriculum for which scholarship awards are made to those courses likely to lead to success in college (for example, the State Scholars or pre-college curriculum).
- Eliminating the age limit at which GED earners who take the ACT within five years of earning their GED may be eligible for KEES ACT supplemental awards.

Modifications to the KEES statute being considered include:

- Offering an additional \$1,500 to Jeff Green Scholars (high school graduates with a 4.0 average and an ACT composite score of 30 or higher).
- Adding a bonus award for ACT scores of 22 or higher and/or raising the initial ACT threshold to 18.
- Calculating KEES awards and distribution in such a way that KEES courses taken in middle school will contribute to a student's overall KEES award.

CPE, KHEAA, and KDE staffs are vetting these recommendations with advisory boards, colleges and universities, other stakeholders, and interested legislators. They will bring a set of recommendations to the Council, the KHEAA board, and the Kentucky Board of Education for review in the fall. Ideally, as the KBE modifies the Program of Studies (Kentucky's minimum graduation requirements) to address the need to prepare all high school graduates for college and the skilled workplace, Kentucky's high school graduation requirements and the KEES will be aligned.

Changes affecting high school graduates would be implemented only seven years after the statute's enactment so that students entering middle school will have adequate time to prepare for a more rigorous high school curriculum.

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